What is claimed is:

1. A method operable on a computer for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising the steps of:

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;

retrieving a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items;

determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the plurality of items in a single package;

if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,

dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,

printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,

automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in each sub-order, and

packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and

mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

2. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the customer order is received by mail on a pre-printed form.

3. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the selected characteristic is chosen from the group comprising: item weight, item thickness and item size.

4. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the step of packaging each of the sub-orders comprises the steps of:

printing a mailer for each sub-order;

placing each mailer on an assembly line; and

placing each item in each sub-order on the associated mailer as the mailer traverses the assembly line.

5. A method in accordance with claim 4 wherein:

each mailer comprises a printed paper mailer;

each paper mailer includes, on a first side, a bar code indicative of the items to be packaged with the mailer and on a second side a customer address.

6. A method in accordance with claim 5 wherein the assembly line comprises:

a scanner for reading the bar code on each mailer;

a plurality of hoppers, each hopper containing a plurality of like items; and

a mechanism responsive to computer control for moving an item from a hopper onto a mailer.

7. A method in accordance with claim 6 and further including a customer message on the front of a mailer readable by a customer and indicating that a customer order has been fulfilled in multiple packages.

8. A method in accordance with claim 7 wherein the step of packaging each of the sub-orders includes shrink-wrapping each of the sub-orders in a plastic wrap so that the customer address and customer message are readable through the plastic wrap.

9. A method in accordance with claim 1 wherein the step of receiving a customer order is performed at a location geographically remote from the step of packaging each of the sub-orders.

10. A system for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising:

a processor;

a memory connected to the processor, the memory storing data and instructions for controlling the operation of the processor;

the processor operative to perform the steps of

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;

retrieving, from the memory, a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items;

determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the items in a single package;

if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,

dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,

printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,

automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in each sub-order, and

packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and

mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

11. A system in accordance with claim 10 wherein the customer order is received by mail on a pre-printed form.

12. A system in accordance with claim 10 wherein the selected characteristic is chosen from the group comprising: item weight, item thickness and item size.

13. A system in accordance with claim 10 further including an assembly line and wherein the step of packaging each of the sub-orders comprises the steps of:

printing a mailer for each sub-order;

placing each mailer on the assembly line; and

placing each item in each sub-order on the associated mailer as the mailer traverses the assembly line.

14. A system in accordance with claim 13 wherein:

each mailer comprises a printed paper mailer;

each paper mailer includes, on a first side, a bar code indicative of the items to be packaged with the mailer and on a second side a customer address.

15. A system in accordance with claim 14 wherein the assembly line comprises:

a scanner for reading the bar code on each mailer;

a plurality of hoppers, each hopper containing a plurality of like items; and

a mechanism responsive to computer control for moving an item from a hopper onto a mailer.

16. A system in accordance with claim 15 and further including a customer message on the front of a mailer readable by a customer and indicating that a customer order has been fulfilled in multiple packages.

17. A system in accordance with claim 16 wherein the step of packaging each of the sub-orders includes shrink-wrapping each of the sub-orders in a plastic wrap so that the customer address and customer message are readable through the plastic wrap.

18. A system in accordance with claim 10 wherein the step of receiving a customer order is performed at a location geographically remote from the step of packaging each of the sub-orders.

19. A method for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising the steps of:

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;

retrieving a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items;

determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the items in a single package;

if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,

dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,

printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,

automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in each sub-order, and

packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and

mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

20. A system for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising:

means for receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;

means for retrieving a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items;

means for determining, based on the selected characteristic, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

means for, if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the items in a single package;

means for, if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,

dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,

printing a mailer including a control indicia on the mailer,

automatically selecting, based on the control indicia, items for inclusion in each sub-order, and

packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and

means for mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

21. A method operable on a computer for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising the steps of:

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;

determining, based on a selected characteristic for each of the plurality of items, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, packaging the plurality of items in a single package;

if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate,

dividing, based on the selected characteristic, the customer order into multiple sub-orders, each sub-order including a subset of the plurality of items selected so that the sub-order will be at the desired postal rate,

packaging each of the sub-orders individually so that the customer order comprises multiple packages; and

mailing the single or multiple packages to the customer.

22. A method operable on a computer for selecting and packaging items for mailing, comprising the steps of:

receiving a customer order specifying a plurality of items for shipping by mail;

determining, based on a selected characteristic or each of the plurality of items, if a single package containing the plurality of items will exceed a desired postal rate;

if the single package will not exceed the desired postal rate, printing a single mailer including a control indicia for operating a machine to place the plurality of items into a single package;

if the single package will exceed the desired postal rate, printing a plurality of mailers, each of the plurality of mailers including a control indicia for operating a machine to place a selected subset of the plurality of items into a package, the multiple packages associated with the plurality of mailers together fulfilling the customer order.